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John K. Young

Marshall University, youngj@marshall.edu

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William Plomer, Transnational Modernism and the Hogarth Press

John K. Young

William Plomer (1903–73), a self-described ‘Anglo-Afro-Asian’ novelist, poet, editor and librettist, spent only the early years of his lengthy career as a Hogarth Press author but still ranks as one of the Woolfs’ most prolific writers, with a total of nine titles issued during his seven years with the Press. Like Katherine Mansfield, Plomer made his mark with Hogarth before signing with a more established firm, but the depth and breadth of Plomer’s career with the Woolfs is significantly greater: his five volumes of fiction presented Hogarth’s readers with groundbreaking portraits of South African, Japanese and (British) working-class cultures. In 1933 Plomer moved to Jonathan Cape, though he continued publishing poetry with Hogarth, both in his own volumes and in John Lehmann’s collections, into the 1940s. Beginning in 1937, Plomer replaced the famed Edward Garnett as Cape’s editorial adviser, serving in that capacity for the remainder of his career.¹ Though perhaps now best known, especially in Britain, for the finely crafted verse of his later years, Plomer is a noteworthy figure in new histories of modernism for his role in the international scope of that movement. In this essay I focus primarily on Plomer’s South African fiction, especially *Turbott Wolfe* (1926) and ‘Ula Masondo’ (1927), two incisive portraits of racialisation’s effects on both black and white subjects, aimed at a British reading public. While his later Hogarth novels, *Sado* (1931) and *The Case Is Altered* (1932), may seem to lack the experimental dynamism of *Turbott Wolfe*, I locate their underlying social subversiveness through queer narratological readings. Finally, I relate Plomer’s career with the Woolfs to their own transition from a coterie Bloomsbury hand press to a ‘proper publishing business’ by the 1930s, in Leonard’s words (*Downhill* 68).

Because Plomer’s works are so various – and I mean here only his Hogarth fictions, much less his later libretti and poetry – they may seem to resist critical categorisation, thus adding to his relative obscurity

within accounts of modernism. But what is most striking about Plomer's career, especially in its earlier phases, is precisely his works' refusal to situate themselves within easily recognisable patterns. The highly charged experimental style with which *Turbott Wolfe* illuminates the corrosive effects of interracial taboos in South Africa, or the attempt to inhabit the narrative perspective of a black subject in 'Ula Masondo', seem nowhere to be found in the almost glacial description of British-Japanese interactions in *Sado*. Even if we read this stylistic change as expressive of *Sado's* (sub)textual portrait of homosexuality, that narrative tendency then seems to disappear in *The Case Is Altered*, a crime drama based on a sensational London murder. Given Plomer's consistent interest in his own situatedness – as his cultural and geographical contexts were moving from Zululand to Tokyo to London – his contributions to modernism may best be understood within the rubric of geomodernism, a term advanced by Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel to express a 'geocultural consciousness—a sense of speaking from outside or inside or both at once, of orienting toward and away from the metropole, of existing somewhere between belonging and dispersion' (4). These are certainly the terms in which Plomer saw his own career, especially in its Hogarth Press phase; as he wrote to Leonard Woolf in 1927, 'Since I was 16 I have lived in daily contact with non-Europeans, & sometimes before that, so you can see why my view of Europe is not like that of a European: & I defy anybody to say that it is distorted' (Archives).

Plomer produced his early fictions from a position between London and the 'savage' colony: as the son of English emigrants to South Africa who spent his formative years in that country, Plomer operates as both a guide to South African culture, for his British metropolitan readers, and as a fierce critic of that culture, for his local audiences, many of whom reacted with outrage at both *Turbott Wolfe* and *Voorslag*, a short-lived journal founded by Plomer, Roy Campbell and Laurens van der Post (later a Hogarth author himself, with the 1934 novel *In a Province*). Plomer's debut novel appeared in the midst of European modernism's complex negotiations with the necessary alterity of the African other; as Simon Gikandi concludes, 'modernism sought energies in the strangeness and distance of the other but it could only bring this other back in the terms that seemed to fit into its essentially Eurocentric framework' (49). In his early fictions, then, Plomer functions as a (white) representative of colonial exchanges with the (black) African other, as the narrator of *Turbott Wolfe* is a character named 'William Plomer', and as suggested by the very title of *I Speak of Africa* (1927), the volume of stories that followed *Turbott Wolfe*. While *Turbott Wolfe* is unique in its advocacy

of interracial sexuality ‘as a possible *solution* to the colour question’ (Rabkin 78), the novel also shies away from any consistent engagement with the points of view of its black characters, as part of a modernist tendency ‘to separate the body of the savage from its aesthetic objects so that the latter could be valued even in the face of hostility toward the former’ (Gikandi 42). The critiques of South African racialisation in *Turbott Wolfe* come almost invariably from its white characters, as in the following declaration: “‘You take away the black man’s country, and, shirking the future consequences of your action, you blindly affix a label to what you know (and fear) the black man is thinking of you—the native question.’ Native question, indeed! My good man, there is no native question. It isn’t a question. It’s an answer”’ (71). The speaker here is neither ‘William Plomer’ (the character) nor a ‘native’ African, but Mabel van der Horst, a Dutch settler who helps to found the Young Africa movement advocating ‘miscegenation’ and marries Zachary Msomi, a black African. Mabel effectively serves as her husband’s spokesperson, as the novel does not occupy Zachary’s perspective itself, focusing on his symbolic value in lieu of actual subjectivity, and thus signalling the limits of *Turbott Wolfe*’s capacity for operating outside of its own racialised circumstances of production.

After briefly outlining Plomer’s biography, the remainder of this chapter seeks to examine such complexities in the bulk of his Hogarth fiction, not only in the early interventions into what was still commonly referred to in South Africa as ‘the colour question’ in the 1970s (as in the quotation from David Rabkin above), but also in his later entries into other zones of alterity for his Hogarth readers: Japan, the British working class and, at least implicitly, a range of queer subcultures. To (re)inscribe William Plomer into histories of the Hogarth Press, and of transnational modernism more broadly, I conclude, means not only restoring a significant historical figure, but also revising still commonly held conceptions of literary modernism itself, in relation to colonialism/imperialism and to contemporary methods of historicising the period.²

‘A displaced person’: Plomer’s Biography

Reflecting on his life for the 1967 article ‘Anglo-Afro-Asian’, Plomer concluded that, almost forty years after his return to England, ‘I am critical of England and the English and although at home among them I do not wholly belong to them’ (11). Plomer’s sense of himself as a ‘displaced person’, as he puts it elsewhere in the same essay (10), was rooted primarily in the travels of his childhood and youth, as he moved

back to England in 1929 and largely remained there until his death in 1973. Plomer was born in the Transvaal region of modern South Africa in December 1903, when the effects of the recently concluded Boer War were still visible in the garrison that was central to his village (Alexander 1). His father, Charles Plomer, was sent by his parents from England to South Africa at nineteen, and eventually landed a position with the colonial civil service, in the Department of Native Affairs at Pietersburg, not quite two hundred miles removed from Johannesburg. Plomer's mother, Edythe Browne, moved back to England with her infant son shortly after his birth, returning to Pietersburg in the summer of 1905, before moving back to England again with Charles later that year, after he had contracted malaria (8). Following the birth of Plomer's brother, John, in 1907, the family moved to Louis Trichardt, a destination that Plomer's biographer describes as 'a still hotter, more fever-stricken town than Pietersburg' (8). From there the Plomers continued to shift back and forth between England and South Africa, until settling, apparently for good, in South Africa in 1918. Four years later, following a possible nervous breakdown (68), Plomer's father left the civil service and relocated to Entumeni, to run a trading station in the Zululand outpost. It was here that Plomer would begin writing *Turbott Wolfe*, at the rather remarkable age of twenty-one. Plomer maintained a conflicted relationship with his father throughout his life, going so far in 1929 as to insist that his last name be pronounced to rhyme with 'rumour', in contrast to the family tradition (maintained by Plomer's brother) of pronouncing it to rhyme with 'Homer' (155).

Of his early years, Plomer writes, 'We never had a settled home, and "at home" meant "in England," so I could hardly think of myself as a South African' ('Anglo-' 6). This sense of dislocatedness led Plomer to an outsider's perspective on the racialised structures of South African society. 'It occurred to me quite early in life that the terms "black" and "white" were too arbitrary' he writes in his late autobiographical essay. 'One thing was constant and rigidly clear—that the presumed line between so-called white and so-called black must never be crossed—at least openly' (6). The writing of *Turbott Wolfe* represented one way of attacking such arbitrary systems; another was the short-lived magazine *Voorslag*, an Afrikaans word for 'whip', with both title and content intended 'to sting with satire the mental hindquarters, so to speak, of the bovine citizenry' of South Africa (*Double Lives* 43). Plomer worked as an editor and major contributor on the magazine's first three issues in 1926 with two other key figures of South African literature from this period, Campbell and van der Post, before Campbell resigned in August of that year following what he viewed as unacceptable editorial

control imposed by *Voorslag*'s financial backer. The third issue included a truncated conclusion of Plomer's story 'Portraits in the Nude', which he later published in its original form in *I Speak of Africa*. (The edited version of the story cut several lines from the closing description of Lily Du Toit, the family governess, regarding her naked body by candlelight before the desired entrance of Cormorant, a visiting Englishman. As Plomer noted in his preface for the Hogarth Press version in *I Speak of Africa*, the story 'is here printed for the first time as it was written' (vii). Like Virginia Woolf herself, then, who famously considered the Press to have made her 'the only woman in England free to write what I like' (D3 43), Plomer enjoyed an editorial liberty with Hogarth that had proved impossible in South Africa.)

Voorslag featured contributions in both English and Afrikaans, and Campbell had hoped to include material in Zulu as well (Gardner & Chapman 1). Beyond this cosmopolitan content, the journal also expressed its editors' interest in what they viewed as the superior aesthetic and moral standards of European culture. While *Voorslag* has acquired a significant reputation in histories of twentieth-century South African literature, it remains, as Colin Gardner and Michael Chapman note in their introduction to its facsimile reprint, 'for many people a legend rather than a concrete reality; it seems likely that the journal was not actually read or even seen by many of the writers who responded in a general way to its appeal and challenge' (13).³

Following the magazine's dissolution, at least in its original scope, in 1926, Plomer and van der Post took advantage of an unexpected opportunity to leave South Africa, sailing for Japan at the invitation of two sailors van der Post had befriended, with Plomer now installed as a special correspondent for the *Natal Witness*, a local newspaper. The ship's captain, Katsue Mori, in turn hoped to employ Plomer, who had acquired a reputation as the author of *Turbott Wolfe*, as part of his company mission to erode barriers against Japanese trade by securing the imprimatur of established cultural figures in Africa (Alexander 113). Plomer remained in Japan until 1929, completing work on *I Speak of Africa* and composing another volume of stories, *Paper Houses*, as well as a collection of poems. At this point Leonard Woolf also invited Plomer to serve as Hogarth's book traveller in Japan, offering the 'usual commission of 10% of the net order' but Plomer declined (Archives).⁴

The immersion in an entirely different society seems to have freed Plomer, relatively, to pursue a more openly homosexual life. Unlike his later friend E. M. Forster, Plomer portrayed a range of gay relationships in his fiction, most notably in *Sado*, *The Case Is Altered* and

The Invaders (1934). Generally, Plomer viewed his formative Japanese experience as ‘my university’:

I was being changed from a spasmodic improviser into a shaper, I was learning to think as well as to feel, and was acquiring a viewpoint which would enable me to see distant England and English civilization through Japanese eyes, as well as in a new perspective through my own. (I say nothing of South Africa, which was by then out of sight and almost out of mind.) In short, I was being educated. (‘Anglo-’ 9–10)

Plomer settled in England in 1929, publishing *Sado* with the Woolfs in 1931 and *The Case Is Altered* the following year. While *Sado* lost £64 in its first year (Willis 196), *The Case Is Altered* became Plomer’s most commercially successful novel, and one of Hogarth’s best-sellers during the period in which Virginia Woolf worked actively as an editor and publisher. Indeed, Plomer’s third novel was the August selection for the Book Society, leading to a £150 advance (rather than the usual £10) and helping Plomer earn more than £1,000 in 1932, easily the highest profits of his career to that point (Alexander 182). Hogarth reissued a cheaper edition in 1935, part of a series called Hogarth 2/6 Fiction, which also included Vita Sackville-West’s *Family History* and F. M. Mayor’s *The Rector’s Daughter*. Despite discussions of a film adaptation in both Britain and the USA, no such version materialised: Warner Bros. found the novel ‘interesting but lacking a strong enough plot for film purposes’, while a British version seems to have foundered over the question of rights fees (Archives).

Plomer left Hogarth amicably in 1933, publishing *The Child of Queen Victoria and Other Stories* with Jonathan Cape, though the Woolfs issued his *Selected Poems* in 1940 as well as reprints of *Sado* and *The Case Is Altered*.⁵ As Leonard explained in a letter to Vita Sackville-West (after she had received a competing offer to publish with Heinemann), Hogarth had lost money on all of Plomer’s books after *Turbott Wolfe*, until the commercial explosion of *The Case Is Altered* (*Letters* 318). The remaining decades of his varied and remarkable career included editing the diary of the Victorian clergyman Francis Kilvert; serving as a civilian naval intelligence analyst during World War II; collaborating with Benjamin Britten on the opera *Gloriana*, produced for Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation in 1953; writing a final novel, *Museum Pieces*, about his long-time companion, Anthony Butts, who had committed suicide in 1941; producing several acclaimed volumes of verse and three memoirs (including his posthumously published autobiography); being named a Commander of the British Empire; and winning the Whitbread award for a book of illustrated children’s verse in the year of his death. Like

many other illustrious authors, who either began their careers with the Hogarth Press before departing for larger firms, or who could offer it more ephemeral publications while under contract elsewhere for their major works, William Plomer helped to make the Hogarth Press more than the publisher of Virginia Woolf's works, or indeed even of Woolf's, Vita Sackville-West's and Sigmund Freud's works, as it is often still regarded. The remainder of this chapter returns first to Entumeni to cover that territory in greater detail.

'Nearer the heart of things than any other publisher
in London': Publishing South African Fiction in
Britain

In June 1924 the Woolfs received a letter from a twenty-one-year-old aspiring novelist in Zululand, announcing that he wished to send them the manuscript of his first book because 'I suspect you are nearer the heart of things than any other publisher in London' (qtd in Willis 128). That Plomer, a young man living in a fairly remote section of Africa, should have been familiar with Hogarth when the firm was still in its early stages of development seems rather surprising.⁶ But Plomer's interest in the Woolfs may have derived from their previous forays into colonial works, such as Katherine Mansfield's *Prelude* (1918), and because their Bloomsbury sensibility was willing to question the racial and sexual foundations of empire, as in Leonard Woolf's novel, *The Village in the Jungle*, published in 1913 by Edward Arnold and written to reflect Woolf's uncomfortable experiences as a colonial administrator in Ceylon.⁷ Leonard wrote twice to Plomer in early 1925, expressing his own interest but wishing to wait until Virginia had also reviewed the manuscript before issuing a contract. Leonard's letter of 1 February reports, 'The MS. of your novel has arrived and I have read sufficient of it already to see that it is very interesting. I should like to take some time to read it carefully and I should also like my wife, who is at the moment ill, to read it before we come to any definite decision. . . .' (Archives). Two months later, there had still been no 'definite decision' – a fairly short interval by many publishers' standards but no doubt a vexing one for Leonard. He wrote to Plomer again on 3 April:

I am really ashamed at not having yet made a definite decision about your book. I have read it myself & think very highly of it, but I am most anxious that my wife should also read it. She is much better & so we have come here [Rome] for a short holiday. As soon as we get back to London after Easter, she will read it & I will let you know our decision at once. The book could

not in any case be published until the autumn. But I must really apologise to you for this delay.

Personally I think the book in many ways remarkable, & should like if it is possible to publish it (Archives).

From there work proceeded quickly, as by the following month both Virginia and Donald Brace (as Plomer's prospective American publisher) had reviewed the manuscript, and both agreed with Leonard that a lengthy speech from the missionary Friston should be cut, as he suggested in a letter to Plomer on 21 May (Archives). A month later, Plomer replied, 'I suffer very much from having no local criticism of my work, and I am obliged to admit that Friston's speech is tedious—but if you only knew the conditions under which I write! I am immediately considering how I can shorten this speech, and directly I get home I will re-draft and forward it to you' (Archives). True to his word, Plomer had completed this revision by 28 June, but the planned autumn publication was delayed until 1926 by a printers' strike.

The procedures employed to approve of *Turbott Wolfe* as a Hogarth Press title are noteworthy within the Woolfs' history as publishers, as they constitute one of the few surviving examples of Virginia's work as a publisher. Woolf apparently read every fiction manuscript submitted to the Press before selling her share to John Lehmann in 1938, but few records of her actual editorial work have survived. Hermione Lee takes this lack of evidence to conclude that Hogarth's 'editorial acumen [was] mostly, but not entirely, Leonard's' (367), but the Hogarth historian J. H. Willis makes a convincing case for 'Virginia's essential role as a reader of fiction manuscripts', with Leonard's insistence on receiving her input on *Turbott Wolfe* as his primary example (129). Virginia's diaries include occasional mentions of manuscripts the Press rejected – as in her note of rejecting submissions by Mary Butts and two other writers because 'Novels are the great blood-suckers . . . I fancy that we don't do as well as we should with novels' (150) – but actual editorial advice seems almost always to come from Leonard. This evidence may suggest that Virginia served more as a reader for the Press than as an actual editor, but, if we consider the Woolfs as a collaborative entity, as suggested by Catherine Hollis' important essay on Hogarth's 'double signature', we might easily imagine that Virginia expressed her editorial judgements about incoming manuscripts with Leonard in conversation, and that he then conveyed these criticisms and suggestions within his own correspondence with Hogarth authors. Indeed, Leonard's letter to Plomer about revising *Turbott Wolfe* indicates precisely such a dynamic: 'Mr. Brace said with regard to the MS that he enjoyed it very much up to the speech of Friston which he thought much too long. As a

matter of fact both my wife and I had independently thought the same. We think that you rather spoil the effect of your book by “preaching” the moral at too great length, which really comes through, and should be allowed to come through, in the remainder of the book’ (Archives). Rather than viewing Hogarth’s editorial ‘acumen’ as largely Leonard’s, then, the much more likely scenario seems to me to be that which we see in evidence with *Turbott Wolfe* and in later correspondence from Leonard about *Sado* and *The Case Is Altered*: Leonard’s letters reflect both his and Virginia’s editorial opinions, and the process of sorting out from which spouse and co-publisher a particular idea originated is likely impossible at this point in history, if it even would have been at the time.

Aside from their usual publishing habits, the Woolfs would no doubt have been especially concerned to arrive at a joint opinion about the manuscript of *Turbott Wolfe*, given both the novel’s experimental design and, more importantly, its culturally explosive content. The latter was especially an issue in South Africa, though Britain was hardly immune to anxieties about sexuality and race, as demonstrated, for example, by the reactions to Nancy Cunard’s relationship with Henry Crowder, the African American pianist.⁸ Throughout the publication process, Leonard remained highly concerned that Plomer’s novel would resemble too closely actual people and events in Zululand. Plomer assured him several times that the events and characters were fictional, and the published novel carried the following note: ‘None of the characters in this book refers to any living person, nor are their opinions necessarily those of the author.’ Nevertheless, Plomer’s copy of the book, now housed among his papers at the Durham University Library, includes more than fifty of Plomer’s handwritten notes connecting characters and events to historical incidents.⁹

Despite Nadine Gordimer’s lament in her introduction to *Turbott Wolfe*’s Modern Library reissue in 2003 – ‘It is an inexplicable lapse on the part of literary scholars and critics that *Turbott Wolfe* is not recognised as a pyrotechnic presence in the canon of renegade colonialist literature along with Conrad’ (xix) – Plomer’s debut novel has remained decidedly on the margins of modernist literary histories, so a brief summary is likely in order. A Conradian narrative in which the title character relates his experiences as a white trader in Zululand to the narrator, himself named William Plomer, *Turbott Wolfe* is probably most notable today for its advocacy of so-called miscegenation as the way to promote a ‘Eurafrican’ society, a transition the novel’s main characters imagine will occur as part of their conviction that ‘the white man’s day is over. Anybody can plainly see that the world is quickly and inevitably

becoming a coloured world' (59). This is part of a manifesto for a group that calls itself Young Africa, insisting that 'All this Empire-building's a blooming blind alley' (72). After becoming powerfully attracted to Nhliziyombi, a servant girl whom he finds 'aboriginal, perfectly clean and perfectly beautiful' (30), Turbott Wolfe joins Young Africa, along with the romantic triangle of Friston, a missionary; Mabel van der Horst, a Dutch settler; and Zachary Msomi, a 'native' (as the novel calls him) who eventually marries Mabel. Although Wolfe identifies his desire for Nhliziyombi at first to be 'not only against my conscience, but against my reason; against my intellect; against my plans; *against myself*' (33), it leads to his political support for the Young Africa movement, and in turn to his trading licence being revoked by the watchful local government.

Plomer's debut novel is also noteworthy for its experimental style and structure. While most of the narrative consists of Wolfe's recollections for his occasionally intrusive interlocutor, the book ends with two appendices, ostensibly consisting of papers found by Wolfe following Friston's suicide. These include notes about a new type of man called the 'politico-aesthete', who 'staggers . . . under the weight of the past; and struggles . . . under the load of the future' (135), along with three poems (originally written, like the notes, by Plomer himself). These appendices have the distinctly modernist effect of destabilising the narrative's conclusion, which now shifts from Wolfe's dying voice to Friston's writings and to the editorial intervention of Plomer the narrator. As Stephen Gray observes, 'The real shock of *Turbott Wolfe* is that, while satirizing the society around him, as all agree, Plomer is also sabotaging its most reliable form, realist fiction' (197). In its seemingly disjointed structure, shifting among Wolfe's oral recollections, diary entries, letters, and newspaper articles, before finally settling on a set of documents that transfer attention away from the apparent narrative centre, Plomer's novel is again evocative of Conrad's representational techniques, which, as Michael Valdez Moses notes, 'are *the concrete manifestations of the systems of social organization and communication that prevail at the peripheries of empire*' (62, original emphasis). As Moses explains, 'the peculiarly dispersed, mobile, heterogeneous, decentralized, and unorganized European community on the fringes of empire was unusually dependent on and particularly challenged (even disadvantaged) by the unevenly developed and distributed system of communication that prevailed' (62). Plomer himself was both inside and outside that kind of 'European community'; as he notes in his essay 'Anglo-Afro-Asian', the words 'at home' for his family signified 'in England', so 'I could hardly think of myself as a South African' (6), but after living in England for

forty years he still found himself feeling of the English ‘although at home among them I do not wholly belong to them’ (11).

As a narrative seeking to represent black subjectivity for white South African and British audiences, *Turbott Wolfe* positions its author/narrator within a customary colonialist dialectic of desire, even as it seeks to unsettle such structures. As Jacqueline Rose asks, ‘given that in the colonial setting, to act in the other’s interests was the problem rather than the solution (acting on behalf of blacks has been one of colonialism’s strongest rationales), whose desire or fantasy are we dealing with here?’ (334). *Turbott Wolfe* does not fit precisely into this kind of framework, most notably in its refusal of the usual anxieties about desires between European women and ‘coloured’ men (as in *A Passage to India*, say). At the same time, Plomer’s novel is consistently presented from within the narrative perspectives of Turbott Wolfe, who finds himself ‘intestinally sick’ at the ‘catastrophe’ of Mabel van der Horst’s relationship with Zachary Msomi (76); and Friston, who imagines himself as the ‘father of a half-caste nation’ (107). The narrative occupies Mabel’s consciousness only through her dialogue with other characters, and offers even less entry into the mind of Zachary, focusing on his physical appearance through other characters’ perceptions. Such hesitancy is no doubt complicated by Plomer’s efforts to conceal the homosexual origins in his own desire to cross racial boundaries, but the novel as a whole, for all the reactionary controversy it aroused in South Africa, remains finally in the colonialist mode of representing the African ‘experience’ to white metropolitan readers; as Peter Blair notes, Wolfe in joining the Young Africa movement ‘attempts not to confront but to circumvent the entire problem of otherness by eradicating distinctions of race’ (591). As Turbott Wolfe tells Plomer (as the narrator) early in the novel, ‘“I don’t want you to think that I had ever really been out of sympathy with the natives: it was simply that their existence, their *blackness*, if you see what I mean, had seemed too much for me”’ (27). While Plomer and his novel clearly distance themselves from this estrangement with the fact of blackness, they also remain, perhaps inevitably within this historical moment, implicated in a fundamentally racialised epistemology. I would not go so far as Peter Blair’s claim that, because Wolfe’s support for interracial sexuality is rooted in his own vexed desire for Nhliziyombi, the novel ‘risks undoing its own indictment of antimiscegenation prejudice’ (592); rather, I see that indictment proceeding from the racialised structure of early twentieth-century Zululand society, so that *Turbott Wolfe* critiques the South African race/sex system while also retaining a textual self-awareness of its situatedness within that system.

While *Turbott Wolfe*’s narrative structure operates entirely within

a racist epistemology, 'Ula Masondo', the most noteworthy story in Plomer's next volume of Hogarth fiction, gestures towards different narrative possibilities by virtue of its focalisation through the title character's perspective. Just as Plomer's later Hogarth novels will implicitly question the heterosexual normativity of their heterodiegetic narrators, 'Ula Masondo' compels a readerly self-awareness of its narrator's presumed whiteness. In its portrayal of a young man's life-changing journey to Johannesburg and life in the diamond mines before returning to his small town with his pregnant lover, 'Ula Masondo' is an early example of a common narrative motif in twentieth-century South African fiction, and thus of a narrative structure that implies a white audience desiring a transient identification with an archetypal black character. More so than most such fictions, I would argue, Plomer's text remains aware of the readerly dynamics around which it is structured. The story begins:

The white storekeeper who sold Ula Masondo a blanket was a jovial-looking man. The morning had begun well, he thought, counting the money into the till: twenty-five shillings before breakfast.

'Goodbye,' he said cordially when the native turned to go.

'Ja, *baas*, stay in peace.'

The white man wondered 'what that boy wanted with such an expensive blanket,' for he fancied himself a little as a psychologist. He could not find a satisfactory reason, so he consoled himself with the thought that 'those Masondos are all alike, extravagant, improvident, but you can't help liking them all the same'. (51)

After opening with a standard white perspective on the 'native' customer, who receives not even a pronominal referent in his line of dialogue, the story shifts to Ula Masondo's point of view for the next seventeen of its nineteen sections, returning to the storekeeper only in the final, framing paragraphs. But even in its seemingly normative introduction, 'Ula Masondo' gestures toward a different narrative economy, by making explicit mention of the storekeeper's racial identity in the second word. Whereas modern American literature, in Toni Morrison's famous insight, signals a character's whiteness precisely through the absence of any racial reference, Plomer's story reverses that dynamic with its opening description of the shopkeeper, implying a reader who identifies characters in racialised terms, but who does not necessarily proceed from whiteness as an unmarked norm.

This is not to suggest that traces of racialised cultural norms are not still at work within 'Ula Masondo'. After a mining accident has left Ula severely injured, for example, the narrator reports: 'Although he moved with something of the natural style of his race, and although he was trying now to walk jauntily in the style he most admired, an

injury still obliged him to limp' (77). This reference to a black African 'natural style' combines with such features as the story's title to construct an implied reader outside of Ula Masondo's frame of narrative reference, a reader who can approach the story's title character only on this external basis, even while entering into the shared fiction of the story's restricted focalisation along the way. The necessity for the framing device of the shopkeeper's conversations, first with Ula himself and then with the storekeeper's wife, implies a reader who can gain access to Ula's story only through such points of white entry, an effect heightened by the limited access to Ula's consciousness even in those sections narrated through his point of view. Derek Attridge observes of a later white South African novelist's portrait of a black focalised subject, J. M. Coetzee's Michael K, that the narrative's frequent use of such phrases as 'he thought' has the effect of 'continually reminding us that we are outside Michael K's consciousness', so that 'although we learn in moving detail of his thought processes and emotions, we never feel that we have assimilated them to our own' (50). For Attridge, the use of the construction 'he thought' in this context conveys 'the authorial voice's inability or reluctance to speak for the character by means of free indirect discourse' (50 n32). A similar distancing is at work in 'Ula Masondo', though perhaps without the full carefulness and complexity evident in Coetzee's *The Life and Times of Michael K*; in the case of Plomer's story, the framing device in conjunction with the limits of Ula's focalisation produce a self-conscious limitation of the narrative's capacity for inhabiting the subject positions it imagines. As in the title of the volume itself, *I Speak of Africa*, Ula Masondo remains an object described rather than a speaking subject. Further, just as the title's 'of' implies Plomer's own distance from Africa in relation to his metropolitan British readers, the narrative mechanics at work in 'Ula Masondo' invite a readerly self-awareness of modernism's vexed engagement with and representation of African alterity.

Queer Narratives in Plomer's Later Hogarth Fictions

Aside from some selections in *The Child of Queen Victoria and Other Stories*, published in 1933 with Jonathan Cape, Plomer's fiction did not return to South African terrain once he had settled in England. His last two Hogarth Press novels, *Sado* and *The Case Is Altered*, differ substantially from each other and from *Turbott Wolfe* and *I Speak of Africa*, both in their focus on English subjects and in their shift towards more conventional narrative techniques than the disruptions and ambiguities

of *Turbott Wolfe*. Plomer was living in England when *Sado* and *The Case Is Altered* were published, and in both novels a young wandering Englishman returns to his roots: Vincent Lucas, a painter travelling in Japan who comes to feel that ‘All his youth and strength pointed him towards Europe’ (*Sado* 236); and Eric Alston, who drives away from London and ‘into the country’ (*Case* 339) following a sensational murder at his boarding house. In these respects Plomer seems to retreat from the transnational modernism of his early years, transitioning from a novel set in Japan but largely focalised through an English protagonist to a novel set almost entirely in London. Such shifts may reflect Plomer’s gradual integration into English literary circles of the day, especially through his friendship with Forster; along these lines *The Case Is Altered* participates in a broader movement in 1930s British fiction toward proletarian subjects, as in John Hampson’s *Saturday Night at the Greyhound* (1931) or Edward Upward’s *Journey to the Border* (1938), to cite two Hogarth Press examples.

Simultaneously, though, *Sado* and *The Case Is Altered* unsettle readerly expectations along the lines of sexuality, in each case queering narrative structures through their often subtextual portrayals of gay male relationships. As Ruth Page notes in her discussion of how sex/gender systems relate to narrative structures, ‘readers may bring gendered assumptions with them that influence their interpretation of narrators, even when the heterodiegetic narrator is unmarked for sex’ (197). The narrators in both *Sado* and *The Case Is Altered* are so unmarked, but, as I will argue in this section, these narrators’ relationships to their narratives compels Plomer’s readers to unsettle their own sexed assumptions.

Sado, based in part on Plomer’s own experiences in Japan, moves slowly through the story of Lucas, a young English painter journeying through Japan, and his relationships with the title character and Iris Komatsu, an Englishwoman who has married into Japanese society. The romantic attachments between Lucas and Sado, a perpetually depressed undergraduate, are hinted at and gestured toward as the narrative develops but never quite depicted overtly. When Lucas finally departs to begin his artistic career in earnest in England, he obliquely informs Iris of his sexual relationship with Sado. In response, she exclaims, ‘“Don’t you see that I’ve been waiting and waiting for a word, a sign, a hint from you of some kind of pretence of sympathy or affection”’ (249), but Vincent responds only, ‘“But I thought you realised—”’ (250) and then offers a kiss as a parting ‘“mark of good faith”’ (252). This material, and the novel’s representation of the Lucas–Sado relationship, was surely not *too* oblique for its original readers, however, as it is hinted at even in the book’s title. *Sado* appeared three years after the famous

obscenity trial for Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, at which the Woolfs and many of their Bloomsbury associates were barred from testifying. In its handling of its central gay relationship, *Sado* falls somewhere between the directness of Hall and the opaqueness of Forster in his published fiction (and is also more circumspect than Plomer's own later fiction, especially *Museum Pieces*).¹⁰ As they had with *Turbott Wolfe*, the Woolfs included on later book jackets (in this case for a 1946 reissue of *The Case Is Altered*) excerpts from original reviews, including the following from Sackville-West's (gay) husband Harold Nicolson: 'If I started out to write a book on inversion I should be more plucky about it from the start.'

If not 'plucky' in its content, *Sado* is more so in its narrative style and structure. As Susan Lanser suggests in her essay 'Queering Narratology', 'heterosexual presumptions operate as designators for a narrator's or character's *sexuality* unless an alternative sexuality is explicitly marked' (253–4, original emphasis). *Sado* gestures toward its protagonist's sexuality, for instance in the report that while visiting Japanese courtesans 'the emotions strongest in Lucas were those of the painter' (130–1), but also consistently distances the novel's presumed heterosexual readers, and indeed doubles that distance through its descriptions of a Japanese culture that would have been available in largely stereotypical terms for British readers in 1932. More broadly, *Sado*'s narrative architecture undercuts its readers' tacit assumptions about the sexuality of its narrator. As Lanser observes, perceptions of narratorial reliability are 'perilously tautological' (256), as readers' judgements about the 'norms' by which a narrator and implied author operate are inevitably influenced by the cultural norms in the background of such readerly observations. In the case of *Sado*, the portrayal of Lucas' sexuality constitutes less a classic instance of unreliability than what James Phelan terms 'reliable *elliptical narration*, that is, telling that leaves a gap that the narrator and the implied author expect their respective audiences to be able to fill' (52). The disembodied narrator of *Sado* and its implied author, that is, do not deliberately mislead the reader (just as Lucas does not intentionally deceive Iris) about Lucas' sexuality. Rather, by gesturing towards that aspect of Lucas' character, which has not been evident in the novel's long opening sections describing his experiences in Japan, *Sado* yields a reconsideration of its apparently 'straightforward' narrative once Lucas' homosexuality is evident, thus queering ostensibly standard reading practices.

The Case Is Altered, for the first time in Plomer's career, tells a strictly British story, focusing on a London boarding house and the landlady's murder at the hands of her crazed husband. While *Sado* builds slowly

through its young protagonist's formative relationship with the title character, culminating in Lucas' return home to England, *Case* reads much like a novel of manners in its detailed descriptions of the social life surrounding Beryl Fernandez and her tenants, before veering into the violent conclusion. Obviously in the latter case the novel's slow pace adds dramatic effect to the final scenes, though (as with *Sado*) the underlying narrative is apparent all along, in this case because the story was based on a sensational episode at Plomer's own boarding house. Plomer's landlady, known as Sybil Starr, was herself killed by her husband in November 1929; Plomer escaped likely death himself thanks to a vacation at the time.¹¹

The narrative shifts among various tenants and their eventual responses to the murder, but focuses primarily on Eric Alston and his uneasy relationship with Amy and Willy Pascall, siblings who serve as Eric's fiancée and source of true desire, respectively. That Eric finds a greater pleasure in the faintly erotic relationship with Will, a romanticised figure who sails the globe and returns home only when the whim strikes him, is only slightly submerged in the narrative's focalisations through Eric. As Willis notes, this relationship 'was Plomer's most overt statement of his sexual identity in fiction' (204). In its representations of British working-class culture in the early 1930s, *The Cased Is Altered* is most notable for its assembly of a variety of classes and backgrounds among the population of the boarding house that serves as the narrative's geographical and social centre. In addition, as one scholar notes, the book's 'unconscious anti-Semitism and sexism [are] typical of liberal British writing of the 1930s' (Boxwell 261). The narrator describes Beryl Fernandez, for example, as 'in her Jewishness . . . typical of the spirit of modern life, which is Jewish, feminine, and paradoxical' (110). While the narrator's tone is lightly ironised throughout, the discussion here of the 'spirit of modern life' continues to describe the modern world as one that 'thinks of everything in terms of capitalism and communism' and 'seeks negation instead of the godlike, desires death, perhaps, rather than life' (111). This world is also implicitly a heteronormative society, as becomes clear in the closing descriptions of Alston and Pascall together with Amy:

Imagine these two, a few days after the murder, driving off with Amy into the country in a little old two-seater car which Alston had borrowed from somebody, the three of them wedged in together, Amy in her little red hat with the swallow ornament, Pascall at the wheel with his curls blowing about, and Alston between them, enjoying some of the best moments of his life, while the leafless woods flew past and the speedometer needle, pointing to the highest figure it could reach, trembled as if it were pointing to the magnetic pole of joy. (339)

Thus the novel takes the sensational murder as its ostensible climax, while framing that event with the more significant story of the erotic triangle. As with *Sado*, this narrative structure compels a reconsideration of the narrative as a whole, with an eye towards the ways in which readers' sexed assumptions about the novel's disembodied (and thus presumed heterosexual) narrator have in fact operated precisely according to such assumptions, without having made room for the queer subplot within the novel's depiction of 'ordinary' events in the lives of Londoners.

Commercial Horizons: Plomer's Career With and Beyond the Woolfs

The Case Is Altered propelled both Plomer's career and Hogarth's fiction list further toward a mainstream market. As I noted above, *Case* was easily Plomer's most commercially successful novel with Hogarth, and helped generate net profits of nearly £1,700 for the Woolfs in 1932 (Willis, Appendix B). As I will suggest here by way of conclusion, Plomer's movement toward a more commercially oriented style in *Case* mirrors Hogarth's similar shifts in that direction, as the Woolfs' list in the 1930s increasingly includes both experimental and more conventional titles. (Even Virginia Woolf's own publications in this period transitioned from *The Waves*, which appeared the year before *The Case Is Altered*, to *Flush*, which was published the year after.) On this level *The Case Is Altered* hints as well at the delicate negotiations the Woolfs maintained with the British literary marketplace in the 1920s and 30s; in transforming themselves from a hand press designed for their own and their friends' short work to, in Leonard's words, 'a proper publishing business' (*Downhill* 68) in the late 1920s and early 30s, the Woolfs increasingly located themselves inside the mainstream of the literary market. This is not to suggest that the Hogarth Press became a mainstream firm as such during this period, but it is important to recognise that the Woolfs profited handsomely from such titles as C. H. B. Kitchin's murder mystery *Death of My Aunt* (1929) and Sackville-West's *The Edwardians* (1930) and *Family History* (1932), in addition to *Case* and *Flush*.¹² (Interestingly, Forster includes *The Case Is Altered*, *Saturday Night at the Greyhound* and *The Memorial* among his recommended novels for a December 1932 BBC radio talk.) As I have argued elsewhere, such revenues importantly financed the 'intellectual freedom' that depends upon 'money', as Woolf writes in the manuscript version of *A Room of One's Own* (179), and that continued to make possible

the more challenging texts published by Hogarth in the 1930s, such as *Three Guineas* (1938), Christopher Isherwood's *The Memorial* (1932) or Yuri Olesha's *Envy* (1936). We might then read Plomer's decision to leave the Woolfs for the larger and more established firm of Jonathan Cape through this lens as well. And like Virginia Woolf herself, who, as Hogarth's de facto fiction editor, could set the list within which her own novels appeared, Plomer in his capacity as reader for Cape was in the position of at least influencing the field in which his own later works were published.

Finally, reassessments of both the Hogarth Press and the transnational modernist movement in which it participated should view Plomer's early career as part of a productive exchange between the metropolitan literary market and the challenging representations of coloniality in a novel like *Turbott Wolfe*. As Michael Valdez Moses remarks of Conrad's influence on T. S. Eliot, Woolf and other English modernists, 'our theory of the origins of the aesthetic form of modernist literature must take account of the decisive contribution made by the peculiarly disorienting experiences of the modern European consciousness at the imperial periphery' (46). Along these lines we can see a similar, if more local, intellectual exchange between the Woolfs as publishers and Virginia Woolf as author. The experience of reading and publishing works like *Turbott Wolfe* and *I Speak of Africa*, for example, surely informs the representations of coloniality in Woolf's later texts, such as the famous Anglo-Indian aunt in *A Room of One's Own* or Percival's Indian death in *The Waves*, just as the representations of class systems in *The Case Is Altered* or *Saturday Night at the Greyhound* register in the background of *The Years*' narrative approach to social history.

Plomer's tenure as a Hogarth Press author also coincided with the Woolfs' development into international publishers. Willis notes that by 1929 the Woolfs had made arrangements for distribution in Canada, and by 1936 had retained agents in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa (392) – not to mention, of course, Virginia's American publications through Harcourt Brace from 1921 on. While locally metropolitan in its origins, then, the Hogarth Press was international in its reach, part of what Sara Blair identifies as Bloomsbury's ability to become 'global in its resonances, a site of cultural contact and contestation where both canonical high modernisms and an emergent anticolonial modernism take shape' (814). Plomer's particular contribution to such resonant contestation comes through his work's liminal position on the borders of both nationality and sexuality, a queer geomodernism that eventually reflects the 'sense of speaking from outside or inside or both at once' (Doyle & Winkiel 4) in *Turbott Wolfe*'s South Africa back

onto the London boarding house of *The Case Is Altered*. Similarly, the Hogarth fiction list for the 1920s and 30s revises conventional notions of gender and nationality: colonial fiction from Laurens van der Post (*In a Province*, 1934) and Anna Whyte (*Lights Are Bright*, 1936, in addition to the new edition of Leonard's *The Village in the Jungle* in 1931) appears alongside queered narratives of postwar Europe (Christopher Isherwood's Sally Bowles series), which in turn are juxtaposed with feminist satires (Sackville-West's *Seducers in Ecuador*, 1924, or Julia Strachey's *Cheerful Weather for a Wedding*, 1932). Coupled with the Continental and Russian fiction Hogarth issued in translation – such as Italo Svevo's *The Hoax* (1929), I. A. Bunin's *The Gentleman from San Francisco* (1922) and Yuri Olesha's *Envy* (1936) – the diverse array of fiction from the 'Anglo-Afro-Asian' Plomer and the other works listed above provide a glimpse into the depth of the Woolfs' transnational status, especially during the politically turbulent decade of the 1930s. Plomer's publishing history with the Woolfs thus exposes the cultural networks that intersected the Press, and, by extension, the important ways in which Hogarth titles delivered a diverse array of cultural contexts to their ostensibly local Bloomsbury readership. Leonard and Virginia's growth from a coterie publisher into a commercial firm overlapped with Hogarth's development as a kind of cultural conduit between its broad range of authors and its British, and increasingly international, audiences, rendering the Hogarth Press as precisely the kind of economic and cultural network which now seems quintessentially modernist. A fuller investigation of such connections lies outside the scope of this chapter, but in order to raise such questions we first need a broader sense of the various dimensions in which Woolf's activities as author, editor and publisher intersected with the business and the art of the Hogarth Press, and thus of the specific circuits through which modernist fiction was produced.

Notes

1. In that capacity Plomer recommended such diverse new writers as Derek Walcott, Stevie Smith and Ian Fleming, among others, while also failing to convince his firm of Vladimir Nabokov's marketability and rejecting Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (only to be overruled by Cape). I would like to thank Duff Hart-Davis, executor of the Plomer estate, for permission to use items from the Plomer collection at Durham, and Random House for use of Hogarth Press related material.
2. For important expressions of the changing conceptual dynamics of modernist studies in relation to colonialism and periodisation, see especially the

- September 2006 special issue of *Modernism/modernity* on 'Modernism and Transnationalism', as well as the collections edited by Booth and Rigby, and Begam and Moses.
3. For more detailed discussions of *Voorslag*, see Hallett and Oxley.
 4. On Plomer's representations of Japan in *Sado* as well as the stories set there in *Paper Houses* and in later poems, see Allen.
 5. 'I cannot pretend that I was not sorry to get your letter', Leonard Woolf wrote in April of 1933, after Plomer had announced his decision to switch to Cape; 'I do not like to think of the publishing ties between us being broken, but it will not, I hope, make any difference to our other ties' (*Letters* 315).
 6. By the end of 1923 the Woolfs had published a total of thirty-three volumes since the inception of the Press in 1917, with 1923 the first year in which the annual total reached two figures (and just barely that, with eleven). The total reached twenty-eight volumes in 1925, and remained between twenty and thirty-eight all but one year thereafter until 1939 (Willis, Appendix A).
 7. The Woolfs did not make formal distribution arrangements in South Africa until 1936 (Willis 392), so Plomer presumably acquired Hogarth publications through his English relatives. Hogarth issued a reprint of *The Village in the Jungle* in 1931 alongside *The Waves*, among other notable titles for that year.
 8. See Jane Marcus' chapter on Cunard in her *Hearts of Darkness: White Women Write Race*.
 9. As Alexander observes, these annotations omit Teddy Wolfe, a Johannesburg painter who, like Plomer, struggled with the means of representing his homosexuality, especially the doubly proscribed attraction to African men (80). Plomer's manuscript included several of his own drawings as well, which the Woolfs advised him not to publish. Stephen Gray's 'Turbott Wolfe in Context' includes selected reproductions of the drawings.
 10. On the Hall trial in relation to the Woolfs as publishers and Woolf as author, see Marshik; on the absence of published gay fiction in Forster's career, see Matz.
 11. For further details, see Plomer's *Double Lives* 241–3, and Alexander 162. Woolf relates Plomer's grisly description of the episode at a dinner party in her diary for 30 November 1929 (268).
 12. As Gillespie notes, the Woolfs' publication of Kitchin's two detective novels indicates another respect in which they 'challenged traditional literary categories' and 'marketed Kitchin's novels in ways that emphasized their hybrid intellectual and psychological nature' (36, 37). Gillespie interestingly reads Kitchin's mysteries in relation to Woolf's own interests in crimes against women.

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